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ABSTRACT

The main argument is that standards for certifying teachers are too lax. It is argued that this might have been acceptable when there was a shortage of teachers, but, now that there is an oversupply of teachers, it is time to certify only the best qualified. The author criticizes certification practices which ignore thoretical standards and instead accredit almost any teacher education program. The role of school of education faculty is described as having an inherent conflict, in that faculty wish to help their students and are unwilling to grade them realistically and possibly limit their opportunities to get jobs. It is suggested that teaching cannot be a full status profession as long as a teaching certificate does not guarantee a high level of professional performance. (CD)

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What Does Teacher Certification Stand For?

George Arnstein

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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Dr. Arnstein's views are his own and are not to be attributed to the National Advisory Council on Education Professions Development.

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What Does Teacher Certification Stand For?

George Arnstein

I welcome this opportunity to meet with you today because you are the persons who play a pivotal role in the certification of teachers. At the risk of killing all suspense, I do not know how to certify teachers and thus feel less than confident in speaking to you on the subject. Conversely, I was asked half a year ago to write a paper[1/] describing the issues in certification, a paper which seems to be of sufficient interest to have provoked this invitation for me to be here today.

The point I want to make today is that you, as public servants, have a role which differs sharply from those of our colleagues who prepare teachers. Further, this distinction is blurred in our present procedures and now is the time to look at it critically so that we can deal with it constructively.

Most teachers in the United States get their certificate on the recommendation of a college or department of education which has first been "approved" by one of you, or by a team selected by you. Since substantially all teacher preparation programs are State approved, this means either that all of them are good ("approved") and that all the bad ones (the nonapproved ones) have withered away, or it means that we have such generous standards that approval is not a very meaningful criterion. I suspect it is the latter, which in turn is a legacy of decades of teacher shortages when we called on the colleges to generate the manpower and

womanpower we needed so urgently to staff our double-session classrooms. Today, when we have a teacher surplus, we obviously can and should afford more critical standards for program approval -- and that's the topic at hand. Obviously we ought to see to it that the weak colleges or departments ought to go under before the strong ones do, for otherwise we will be leading hundreds of future teachers astray: They think they will be certificated when in fact they will not; or, worse yet, they may be certificated despite their lack of competence or preparation, and they will then inflict continuing damage on the youngsters entrusted to their instruction and care.

In fact, however, this damage may not be occurring because there is little evidence that teaching certificates truly are related to competence. I have found few certification officers -- you, the persons in this room today -- who are willing to assert that a teaching credential is truly a certificate of competence, that those who hold a credential are assuredly good teachers. To the extent that we are not willing to make this kind of a claim -- this teacher will perform in the classroom or double your money back -- to that extent we do not have a profession, do not have a claim on public confidence, do not have much of anything.

Unfortunately, that is where we are: No agreed upon body of knowledge; no agreement as to performance standards; no enforcement of those standards we have enunciated; and few penalties, revocations, or other means of cancelling those credentials which were issued in error. (It happens, but not very often.)

What I would like to suggest to you today is that we need to start some remedial measures. At least in theory, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education is ready for this kind of effort;

after all, the 1976 theme is "A Profession Now or Never." The question is what you can and should do, now.

Without claiming to have a complete or validated strategy, let me tell you about a recent study undertaken by our Council which is quite germane: We were asked, by Virginia Trotter, the Assistant Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare for Education, to survey the practices now in use to prepare teachers in educational technology -- and also to make recommendations on better preparation.

Our response is contained in a Memorandum with Recommendations.[2] This short report of about nine pages included a close and critical look at the NASDTEC Guidelines[3] and the NCATE Standards.[4] Both of these say the right things in favor of educational technology and how colleges need to be properly equipped, how faculty and curriculum must be adequate and so on. If anything I found the NASDTEC Guidelines on this topic more to my liking than the NCATE Standards, probably because they are more specific. More important, we also found that neither of these sets of criteria are being observed. Some schools have good programs, and some approved or accredited schools have very weak or perfunctory sequences in educational technology. Further, nobody willing to speak for NCATE or NASDTEC is willing to claim that approval or accreditation means that the criteria are truly being observed.

In plain English, this means that the paper requirements and good housekeeping seal of approval do not mean anything operationally and realistically: New teachers come out of approved programs and accredited departments without having to meet the criteria spelled out with a good deal of conviction in the standards or guidelines.

Ladies and gentlemen, that's a major problem and that's where you ought to put your emphasis. Tell your visiting teams to be tougher; tell your schools that they must truly meet the criteria or they will not be approved. Tell them to shape up or they will lose their approval. If you do not insist then the certificate will mean even less than it does today.

As for the possibility that some schools will lose their approval, that some departments will go under, the fact is that our national capacity is now greater than our need, that some will go under and there is a whole lot to be said for giving a bit of a push to those which are weak and which are not living up to their own promises (as given in the usual self-study, catalog, and as claimed through "approval" or "accreditation.")

On a larger scale, I hope you will rethink this whole business of delegating the certification power of the State to colleges. I like colleges and think them capable of making the decision, so that's not the problem. Rather, I worry about the conflict between the helping function of the college and the faculty, as juxtaposed to the discriminating function of the certification officer who is supposed to weed out the weak or incompetent candidates and admit only the strong ones.

Faculty members in teacher preparing institutions quite properly want to help their students. Those who are committed to the notion of mastery learning also manage to bring all (or nearly all) of their students to eventual success, no matter how long it may take. That's good educational practice and that's how we may someday achieve a truly educated and well rounded citizenry. The trouble is that we may also conclude from this that all students who successfully complete the sequence are equally competent, when in fact they are not, that all of them should be credentialed,

when in fact we want to select only those with the greatest promise of performance on the job.

A professor from one of our Northern States explained the whole thing in a nutshell last July (in a discussion group organized by AACTE in Annapolis): We give all of our student teachers an "A" nowadays (he said) because anything less than an "A" means that they won't even get a job interview.

I think that is very nice and supportive of the professor (whose colleagues nodded assent and understanding during the discussion) but I worry about his criteria for recommending candidates for certification by the State.

After all, certification is taken by educational consumers (parents, citizens, students) as a deliberate judgment by an agency of the State, a judgment which says that to the best of our ability this teacher will perform in the classroom or double your money back. You, as certification officers may know that no such guarantee is intended, that no reasonable person can make such promises today, that the state of the art does not permit these types of judgments. But we also know that the present state of the art does permit judgments which are more critical, more mature, based on better use of better data and systems than we now use -- and that's what I submit for your consideration:

* More rigorous application of what we now know about standards for colleges. You have published your standards; what we need is better adherence to them.

* Research and development to work toward better and more effective standards, including review of how well existing standards work. This

could and should include an attempt to compare the effect of private, voluntary accreditation through an organization like NCATE, and the effect of State approval, including interstate comparisons.

* A critical review of the present interrelationships, something like systems analysis to see if we can come up with better systems design, especially the notion that faculty in approved colleges and departments have a role conflict.

* A continuing effort -- and even more intensive effort -- to improve interstate arrangements, not only in terms of certification but also in retirement and similar administrative matters. Present obstacles to interstate mobility are a bad thing, regardless whether we have a teacher shortage or a teacher surplus, either of which could be ameliorated through greater mobility and flexibility.

As I said before I do not have a complete strategy but I share your hopes toward an improved system, a better state of the art. We used to struggle with decades of teacher shortages; now we can and should focus on the improvement of quality since we need no longer be preoccupied with the mere struggle to get some kind of teacher into every classroom.

After all, I used to be a fully credentialed warm body myself.

Footnotes

1. George Arnstein, "Teacher Certification: Is It an Art or a Science?", paper prepared for the Illinois Conference on Educational Policy: Accreditation, Certification and Continuing Education, Chicago, Illinois, October 6-7, 1975.

2. National Advisory Council on Education Professions Development, "Educational Technology and Utilization: The Preparation of Teachers," December 22, 1975.

3. Standards for State Approval of Teacher Education, National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, 1973 Edition (revised).

4. Standards for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, January 1970, reprinted 1975.